

# Life of Saint Mildred, Abbess of Minster in Thanet



by A Lay Tertiary of Saint Francis

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# Preface

The following memoir of Saint Mildred was undertaken at the request of the Benedictine nuns of Minster. Its author felt no slight embarrassment when he first glanced through the records of the Bollandists and other standard sources of information. For it became clear to him that the facts of Saint Mildred's life, as handed down to us, were very few in number, and that even these were much entangled in the meshes of controversy.



The hope, however, of reviving in some measure the memory of a Saint, whose name lives familiarly amongst us, though her fame has all but died away, made the writer set to work with a good will and an earnest determination to consult in fonte every reference he should find bearing upon her history. Most of these he diligently copied out, and thus at length amassed a good store of materials. The next step was to index the various details, and then, after weighing the many opinions on each point, to follow that which seemed most firmly established.

The result, it is true, may hardly warrant the pretentious title given to the book, but such a heading seemed the most simple, and for that reason it was adopted.

Should the reader be distracted by the numerous foot-notes to the text, he will bear more indulgently with them, when he reflects that they refer mostly to controverted points. It seemed to the writer a simpler process to give weighty authorities for the narrative adopted, than to be continually

combating rival opinions. A few points, however, that required clearing up (together with some details that would have hampered the text) have been dealt with in the Appendices.

While thus making a clean breast of his nineteenth century eclecticism, the author would fain borrow a little of the simplicity of the good old writers of Saints' lives. Their fulness of heart did certainly lead them often-times into the charm-land of legend, but this was, for the most part, only a natural effect of their pious and constant meditations; for they dwelt upon the Lives of Saints as a spiritual rather than an intellectual exercise. These old writers made it their first aim to seize upon the essentially beautiful, and often were less anxious about its accidental surroundings than we should be nowadays. And after all, no accidental error of time and of place can rob a poetical thought or holy act of its intrinsic beauty.

The conviction of the present writer is that this short memoir of Saint Mildred has lost in spiritual edification what it, perhaps, has gained in historical accuracy. Still he cherishes the hope that some will find in it at least one good and profitable thought, and then his work in Saint Mildred's good cause will not have been altogether thrown away.

- *Saint Clements Day, 1883*

## **Saint Mildred of Thanet - Her Parentage**

No spot in England is more interesting to the lover of Christian lore than the Kentish Isle of Thanet. Here, of old, came Augustine and his Benedictine brethren, eager to evangelize England. Here, on the green sward, took place that memorable meeting with King Ethelbert, the description of which is at once so thrilling and so picturesque. Here again, throughout the Saxon age, was the soil blessed by the footsteps of sainted kings and bishops, missionaries and pious pilgrims, on their way to that Apostolic See whence Augustine had derived his mission and authority.

In the very heart of this favoured island, by the banks of its winding river, rose the walls of the abbey of the Virgin Mother. It was one of those early Saxon monasteries peopled by widowed queens, young princesses and maidens high and low - the first-fruits to God of a converted nation. The place has been known ever since as Minster. And certainly its most pleasing associations are even yet with the gentle memories of Queen Domneva, Saint Mildred, Saint Eadberg, and those virtuous as well as learned nuns who corresponded quite familiarly with Saint Boniface in the Latin tongue.

Foremost amidst this pious throng stands Saint Mildred, styled by Edward the Confessor as 'the Virgin Mildred beloved of God,' around whose memory so many poetic legends have gathered. Though more than a thousand years have passed since she held mild sway over the choir of nuns at Minster, her name is still everywhere perpetuated in the Isle of Thanet. There is Saint Mildred's Bay, Saint Mildred's

Lynch, Saint Mildred's Road, Saint Mildred's Abbey, aye,  
Saint Mildred's Hotel.

In other parts of Kent there are still four parish churches to her honour, viz., at Canterbury, Tenterden, Nurstead and Preston; while in London we find Saint Mildred the Virgin's in Poultry, and Saint Mildred's, Bread Street, besides the more mundane Saint Mildred's Court: all this showing that our Saint was equally popular with the citizens of London as with her Kentish liege-men.

A fresh interest, however, has been given to the life of this Virgin-Abbess by the public celebration of her festival as in days of yore, by authority of the Holy See, and again by the recent translation of her remains from Deventer, in Holland, to her old home at Minster. There is a special interest, therefore, in gleaning the scattered and fragmentary records of a Saint whose acts, in the language of the old Catholic dramatist, 'Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.'

Mildred came of a holy and royal stock. Her father was Merwald, ruler of the western part of Mercia; her mother Ermenberga, the great-granddaughter of Ethelbert. Merwald was a convert to Christianity, full of zeal and ardour, while Ermenberga inherited all the virtuous traditions of her glorious ancestry. Their marriage took place about the year 655, and was blessed with three daughters and one son, 'all of whom,' says an old Saxon author, 'for love of God, bestowed within their life-time all their goods upon the poor.' The whole family have, in fact, been canonized by the voice of the people. Mildburg, Mildred and Mildgyth, the three daughters, are poetically likened to the cardinal virtues - Mildred shining in their midst as an embodiment of Love. Of the boy, Meresin, little is known, save that 'he was led away to heaven in his youth.'

Saint Mildred's father was the youngest son of the pagan warrior Penda, King of Mercia, who, though he had slain five Christian Kings in battle, was wont to despise such of his converted subjects as did not live up to their calling. 'For,' said he, 'they are despicable and mean who do not worship the God in whom they believe.' This bold descendant of Woden was the progenitor of a long line of Saints. And though he himself never became a Christian, yet all his children were alike conspicuous in their zeal for the faith.

The one of all King Penda's sons, concerning whom least is known, is precisely Saint Mildred's father. The reason is plain. Merwald never ruled the whole of Mercia. His other brothers did. And consequently but little of his personal history has been handed down in the national annals. Still, the little that is known about him is highly honourable.

It would seem that he was already king (or better, perhaps, *regulus* ) of that part of Mercia which bordered on the Welsh country, when Etfrid, a Northumbrian priest, brought the good tidings of the Gospel to his people. Merwald was easily won over to the cause of Christ. So much so, indeed, that the old legend of a lion gently taking bread from Saint Etfrid's hand, has been interpreted of the King accepting the Bread of Life from the Saint.

This event must have happened before 657 , for the Anglo-Saxon chronicle speaks of Merwald, in that year, as counselling his brother, King Wulphere, in the endowment of Medeshamstede, so famous in medieval times as the Abbey of Peterboro'.

Merwald was himself a most liberal benefactor of the Church. The monasteries of Leominster and Wenlock, founded and endowed by him, flourished down to the day when England changed her religion. His venerable remains reposed within

those two houses of prayer - his head at Leominster, and his body at Wenlock. According to the Bollandists, he also founded the See of Hereford. Others add that he took leave of his wife after some years of wedded life, that she might be free to preside over the monastery of Minster; and Florence of Worcester does not hesitate to style him Saint. We may infer something of his kindly and humane disposition from the word mild (gentle and clement), prefixed by him to his three daughters' names. Mildred thus signifies 'the peaceful well.'

In turning to Saint Mildred's ancestry on her mother's side, a brilliant galaxy of Saints unfolds itself before us. For Ermenberga, her mother, was not only descended from Ethelbert, the first Christian King of England, but likewise from Clovis, the first Christian King of France. To scan their heavenly features, however hastily, would far outstrip the limits we have fixed. But we must not entirely overlook the grand monastic movement, chiefly set on foot by them in England, in which they (and Saint Mildred notably) took so prominent a part.

England, when Saint Augustine landed on its friendly shores, was essentially pagan - pagan in heart, in mind, and in worship. The Britons, whom the hardy northmen had driven into the mountains of the far west, were Christians. Christianity, therefore, to the rude Saxon warrior, was the religion of his vanquished foe, whom he heartily and most unjustly despised. So deeply, in fact, was this contemptuous feeling rooted in the national temper, that it might well seem, humanly speaking, impossible for England ever to have been converted, had not the leaders of the nation themselves taken the task in hand.

This they did with wonderful energy; and if it should be urged that they were not all guiltless men, that very

circumstance does but prove the marvellous influence of the grace of God. 'Saxon England,' says Cardinal Manning, 'with all its tumults, seems to me saintly and beautiful.' And why? Because the Almighty worked wonders in those days - supernatural wonders in the hearts of men - that remind us of the effusion of grace in the first ages of the Church, when not only the lame were made to walk and the blind to see, but even an Afra could be suddenly moved by the Holy Spirit to witness to the Truth, and die a martyr's death.

Yes, there must be martyrs to the religion of Christ, at all times, and at all costs. Some testify by their blood; others by word; others again by example. Saint Mildred's illustrious kindred witnessed chiefly in the last of these ways. Their mission was a most exalted one: to give up all things on earth, to withdraw to the silent cloister, and there to pray for the conversion of their people, there to preach the abnegation of the Cross, by the resistless force of heroic example. For, as the poet says:

'The silence often of pure innocence  
Persuades when speaking fails.'

Among Saint Mildred's kindred in this goodly company are the Kings Ethelred and Kenred of Mercia, Ceolwulf and Eadbert of Northumbria; then come the queenly Abbesses Ethelburga, Ermenhilda, Sexburga, Kinneburga; and lastly a whole host of maiden princesses, among whom Saints Ethelreda, Eanswitha, Earcongotha, Wereburga, Kinneswitha, ErmeDgytha, and our Saint's own sisters, Mildburg and Mildgyth.

'How beautiful your presence, how benign,  
Servants of God, who not a thought will share  
With the vain world, who outwardly as bare

As winter trees, yield no fallacious sign  
That the firm soul is clothed with fruit divine! '

The Scriptures tell us that there are some devils that cannot be driven out save by fasting and prayer. The spirit of paganism is one of these; and just as the great Saint Anthony had the mission of expelling Satan from his last stronghold in the desert, so these early Saxon recluses, in their Benedictine homes, fought the Evil One with the surest weapons of Christian warfare.

What wonder, then, that those who had thus devoted their lives to so grand and noble a work, should have been blessed by a grateful posterity, and numbered among the Saints of God!

## Thunor's Crime

Saint Mildred was born about the year 660, not in Kent, as some might suppose, but on the Welsh border-land beyond the Severn, where her father held his sway. It was there that she spent the days of her childhood; and there she would probably have lived and died, had not a tragic event happened in her family, which determined the whole course of her future life. This mournful episode was the murder of her mother's two brothers, Ethelred and Ethelbert, Princes of Kent. Its author was one Thunor, a courtier of King Egbert, who thought thereby to ingratiate himself with his sovereign.

No writer of Saint Mildred's history has ever passed over this dark record in silence; and briefly it runs as follows.

King Eadbald of Kent, at his death in 640, left two sons, Eripenred and Earconbert. But the younger, Earconbert, overreached his brother, and craftily deprived him of his birthright.

Earconbert died in 664, and was succeeded by his son Egbert, who brought up at court his uncle Ermenred's two sons. These youths, Ethelred and Ethelbert by name, led a life of unspotted innocence. Now, in the house of this King Egbert was a certain courtier, 'a limb of the devil,' whose name was Thunor, which signifies Thunder. This man envied and hated the two saintly youths, and laboured assiduously to blacken their innocence in the King's mind.

'I see, O King,' he said, 'that thou art carefully bringing up those who will one day grow bold and take thy kingdom from thee. Therefore I should think it expedient for thee to banish

them to some distant country, or else to hand them over to me to be put out of the way.'

The King was so lukewarm in his reproof of these evil suggestions that Thunor one night, without the King's knowledge, murdered the saintly youths, and shamelessly buried their bodies under the royal throne, at Eastry, near Sandwich. 'He supposed,' says a Saxon writer, 'that they would never reappear, but by the power of God they were made known, for a beam of light stood up through the roof of the hall up to heaven.' The king himself, on going out about the first cock-crowing, saw the wonder, and was terrified. Suspicious of foul play, he summoned Thunor before him, bidding him confess if he had done wrong to the young Princes. Thunor at first was loth to speak; and when he at length did so, it was with barefaced villainy that he recounted the hateful deed.

Egbert was conscience-stricken. He felt the guilt of the crime upon his soul; and next day calling his councillors and thanes together, he laid the matter before them, saying how he desired to make all possible amends.

'He then, with the support of Theodore, the Archbishop, arranged that an order should be issued to fetch their sister (Ermenberga) out of Mercia (into which she had been given in marriage), that she should choose her brothers' wergild, or compensation to the relatives, of such things as seemed good to herself and to her nearest friends.'

Now Ermenberga, at this period, had a family of four children; and it is reasonable to suppose that she took her three daughters, Mildburg, Mildred, and Mildgyth, with her in this sad journey from the west of England to the capital of Kent, a journey at once long and tedious in those days.

Ermenberga's heart was sad indeed as she neared her native Kent. Those green sloping uplands, those dense, majestic forests, those plains and vales so rudely tilled, and yet so fruitful, the buoyant air, fresh wafted from the sea, and the gay sunlight of her old homeland, all called back the bright memories of girlhood, over which the ruthless hand of Time had cast a pall for ever. Perchance as she glided under the shadow of Saints Peter and Paul's great monastery, where the remains of her royal forefathers were all entombed, the thought of the hollowness of earthly pomp sank deeply in her heart. She had loved her young brothers, who had been pure and guileless beyond the wont of men. What compensation *could* she ask for such a death as theirs?

King Egbert stood abashed before the way-worn Queen. His whole frame trembled, as with timid hand he laid a heap of gifts before her. But it was not on the compensation of worldly riches that her mind was set. Her gentle heart was touched by Egbert's deep repentance. He looked upon her mild blue eyes, and there beheld forgiveness. The rest is soon told.

'Turning fairest face  
Unto the slayer - slayer of her loved,  
Her last of kin - in gentleness she spoke:  
"Let sorrow have swift end. Grief will not bring  
Their beauty back from grave. Bless God, and lay  
Thy pride here down in sacrifice. O King,  
Thy band is red; yet He may whiten it,  
Who only spotless lived, the matchless Lily  
That Mary-Mother on her bosom bore."

The King bowed acquiescence. Ermenberga then petitioned for a grant of land in the Isle of Thanet, whereon to raise a monastery of nuns in memory of her beloved brothers. 'And how much of that fair island shall I give thee?' quoth the

king. 'As much,' she made reply, 'as my tame deer can run through in one course.' Now, this hind (adds our Saxon writer parenthetically) 'always ran before her when she was travelling.'

Egbert was struck with the novelty of the proposition. A smile passed over his pale face the first time for many a day. An hour was accordingly appointed for so novel a way of tracing the boundaries, and Saint Theodore, the archbishop, was to be present.

# The Stag Legend

The Isle of Thanet in the days of King Egbert was more thickly wooded than it is now, more grand in its native wildness, and peopled by a race more stalwart and magnanimous than its actual denizens, but its one feature that has marvellously altered is the river girding it from sea to sea. The Wantsume, or wending wanton water (which is now little else than a dyke) was then a broad and noble channel, flowing between the great harbour of Richboro' and the royal palace of Reculver. Its width, according to Saint Bede, was about six hundred yards; and large vessels used to enter it at Richboro', passing out into the Thames on their way to London.

King Egbert and his retinue forded this river at Saare, on their way from the Kentish mainland to Westgate, the spot determined upon for starting the stag. He had not been there long, when -

'Horns were heard  
Resonant from stem to stem, from rock to rock;  
While moved in sight a stately cavalcade.  
Flushing the rivers crystal. Of that host  
Foremost and saddest, Ermenberga rode,  
A queen sad-eyed, with large imperial front  
By sorrow seamed; a lady rode close by;  
Behind her earls and priests. Though proud to man,  
Her inborn greatness made her meek to God.'

The queen's tame deer was let loose close by the bay since called after Saint Mildred. It bounded off in a zig-zag course across the island. 'The queen then so managed that the hind kept running before them, and they followed after her.' In the midst of this exciting chase was Thunor, the invidious

murderer, almost beside himself with rage. He cursed the king, the queen, the land. But still the stag pressed onward. Then Thunor, goading on his horse, rushed frantically before the animal and tried to turn it back. But the earth, says the old legend, opened its mouth before the hateful murderer, and swallowed him up. Whence the place of this dire retribution was ever after known as *Thunores hlcew*, that is, the grave of Thunor.

Such is the old Saxon legend, which would have delighted the heart of Dante had he known it. The gap or ditch where Thunor met his fate is marked on the oldest map extant of the Isle of Thanet as Puteus Thunor. And the fact is incontestable that between Westgate and Minster there is a raised boundary-mark, known as Saint Mildred's Lynch, which is exactly co-extensive with the bounds of Minster manor and parish. This encloses about ten thousand acres - the original grant by King Egbert to Ermenberga and her spiritual posterity.

In spite of this, one hostile critic will have it that the land enclosed within Saint Mildred's Lynch was made up of 'a succession of royal donations to the nunnery within the Isle of Thanet itself . . . extending over several centuries;' while another - an Anglican clergyman like the first - asserts that the Lynch 'very probably was there before ever the manor of Mynstre was granted to Ermenberga.'

Between this Scylla and Charybdis we are not afraid of running our frail monastic bark, with the old legend at its mast-head.

The story of King Egbert's expiation may be viewed as a legend or as an historical fact, or as both. As a legend, it is at once striking and original; in point of fact, we will but say, with Mr. Oswald Cockayne, the editor of two valuable Saxon

fragments relating to Minster, that 'strange as the tale is, it seems in its main features purely historical.'

## Saint Mildred Leaves for Chelles

The old chroniclers say that Ermenberga, on becoming a Benedictine nun, after the events just narrated, took the name of Ebba, or Eve, just as her grand-aunt Saint Ethelberga (the first of English nuns) had assumed that of Tate. She thus came to be known as Domna Ebba, or Domneva, in Latin; and in Saxon as Domne Eafe, and Domne Eve. Henceforth we shall call her only by her monastic designation.

'Domneva built  
A goodly dyke, dividing fair in two  
Sweet Thanet isled upon the sea; so far  
The innocent roe had marked the land of prayer.  
There rose a convents walls, where quiet nuns  
Hymned up meek vows, and filled their souls with tears,  
Their lips with prayers for the lost youths who lay  
Dead 'neath the throne they should have graced with  
beauty.'

Mildred was a maiden already grown up when her mother became Abbess of Minster. Her childhood had been passed amidst the deeply stirring scenes already recounted; while at her mother's knee she had heard of the sanctity of so many of her people, living and dead; and, hearing, she had wondered. Indeed, at this time, says Baronius, the Saxon churches in Britain flourished like the Paradise of our Lord, for they were plentifully adorned with lilies of pure virginity, with violets of religious monks - not so conspicuous because growing in more humble places. They abounded also in most holy Bishops.

With bright examples like these constantly before her, Mildred's thoughts were early turned to heaven. And thus,

while the Abbey walls of Minster were rising higher and higher into the blue sky, her heart was being more and more detached from things of earth. She was fifteen years of age when Saint Theodore of Canterbury hallowed Domneva's church and monastery, placing them under the patronage of the ever-blessed One,

'Who bore in time the world's Eternal King,  
And peerless in the human race has found  
A mother's joy by virgin honours crown'd.'

The new structures were small, massive stone buildings, almost the first of the kind attempted by Saxon craftsmen. They were only a few yards apart one from the other. The river Wantsume flowed past their walls, forming a kind of creek, a little way off, where ships used to anchor.

Domneva took her three daughters with her on entering the cloister. The eldest of these, Saint Mildburg, soon left for Wenlock, in Shropshire, where the fame of her good life has merited her a place in the Roman Martyrology. Her father, Merwald, and her uncle, Wulphere, both took the greatest interest in her new home, and largely endowed it. Mildgyth, the youngest, was destined for the north. Her hidden life and after-renown are thus summed up by a Saxon author: 'Saint Mildgyth lies in Northumbria, where her miraculous powers were oft exhibited, and are still.'

As to Saint Mildred, her mother determined on sending her to France, where Christianity had been established for a century before Saint Augustine's landing in England. Many of the early Saxon Princesses had consequently gone there for their monastic training.

It is not surprising that Domneva singled out the Abbey of Chelles for her daughter's education, seeing that it had been

founded by her ancestress, Sainte Clotilde, and was then actually governed by the saintly Abbess Bertille. A hearty welcome greeted Saint Mildred on her arrival at Chelles. Bertille was justly proud of her new pupil, who had come from far-off Albion to be fitted, under her guidance, for her betrothal with Christ, the Spouse of virgins.

Mildred soon fell in with the ways of her new associates. She earned their love by her sweet and winning ways. Her humility and dutiful bearing towards her elders was especially noticeable. Nor was she backward with her secular pursuits, for we read of a psalter which she had transcribed, with her own hand, ere her scholastic course was ended. Between study and prayer, and innocent recreation, her time passed peacefully away in those old cloisters of Chelles, until an untoward incident happened which must form the subject of the following chapter.

# **The Legend of the Furnace**

The crux of Saint Mildred's history is emphatically the Legend of the Furnace. That story is a mere fable. Its origin is uncertain; but whether or not Jocelyn of Canterbury gave it birth, we may take it that the excitement about Saint Mildred's relics in his day coloured his account of it very appreciably. The legend runs as follows:

While Mildred was at Chelles (in the days when Wilcoma was Abbess), a young man of noble birth, a kinsman of that abbess, became enamoured of our Saint, and made her an offer of marriage; this proposal Saint Mildred rejected. But the Abbess, who was anxious for the match, tried to coax the maiden; and failing, resorted to threats and ill-usage. Mildred bore this with exemplary meekness, keeping steadfast the while in her first resolve.

Again and again Wilcoma tried to make her change her purpose, until at last, maddened by vexation, she seized her young pupil, and cast her (so runs the fable) into a fiery furnace. And when, after a lapse of three hours, Wilcoma returned to the scene of her iniquity, swan-like strains issued from amidst the flames. She then opened the furnace, and Mildred issued thence with radiant features and garb unscathed. Unabashed by this portentous condemnation of her unworthy conduct, Wilcoma, finding herself alone with her ward, pounced upon her like a wild animal, and began shamefully ill-treating her.

On this Saint Mildred made her escape at dead of night; but remembering that she had left some relics behind, she returned to the Abbey, again to take to flight. The Abbess, on discovering this, had the bells rung, called the Bishop to her aid, and sent an armed band in pursuit of the fugitive

maiden. After many and wonderful adventures by sea and land, Mildred was at length able to quit France and regain her native shores.

Such is the substance of William Thorne's very modified account of what Jocelyn before him had recorded, with a flourish of rhetoric and redundant laudations, covering several folios of manuscript. John of Tynemouth follows at a distance in Jocelyn's wake. But he and Capgrave (if the latter be really an independent author) stand alone in this regard.

Thorne was an honest Thanet man, born within sound of the Ave that daily rang from Saint Mildred's Minster; he was also a monk of Saint Augustine's, Canterbury, whither the body of his island-saint had been translated. All credit is therefore due to him for having gathered all he could about Saint Mildred; and the more so, because he very studiously avoids the high-flown rhetoric of his French predecessor, Jocelyn. But William Thorne is the only English chronicler who makes mention of the Legend of the Furnace. For even the author of the History of Saint Augustine's Abbey - who drew so largely upon his chronicle - does not whisper a syllable about it. This silence is most significant.

Neither is there the least record of such an event in any of the Saxon fragments that have come down to us. On the other hand, one of them incidentally remarks that Mildred acquired great sanctity' during her stay at Chelles; similarly, Durham, Malmsbury, Worcester, Huntingdon, Wendover, Cirencester, Westminster, Brompton, Dicet, and Polydore Virgil, while they all make honourable mention of our Saint, breathe not a word about the Furnace.

As for those glorious confessors of the Faith, like Father Cressy and Father Alford (who found means, in the days of

persecution, to write in defence of the old religion), they have either passed it over altogether, or else tried to explain it away; while more modern critics, such as Mabillon and the Bollandists, have simply lost patience over it.

The fact is (as Mabillon well observes) the historical existence of the Abbess Wilcoma is exceedingly problematical; and it is perfectly certain that Saint Mildred could not have been at Chelles under any other Abbess than Saint Bertille. For Saint Bertille ruled the monastery from 656 to 702. Now, as Saint Mildred was a girl in King Egbert's reign (and Egbert died in 673), it is quite clear that her education at Chelles must have been completed before 702. Again, as all chroniclers (Saxon and Norman) agree that Saint Mildred made her profession as a nun at the hands of Saint Theodore of Canterbury (who died in 690), it is quite clear that she must have left Chelles at least twelve years before Saint Bertille's demise.

Jocelyn was consequently altogether misinformed in his statement that Saint Mildred was educated by the harsh and cruel Abbess Wilcoma. Of course, the moment Saint Bertilla is substituted for Wilcoma, the whole legend becomes a sheer impossibility.

We prefer dismissing Jocelyn's legend in this manner, rather than attack it piecemeal. There is an extravagance about the whole narrative, a strain of laboured rhetoric - in fact, an utter want of that simplicity which should at all times characterize the recording of a miracle. The circumstances emphasised by him and Capgrave make it impossible of belief that they should have been associated with a Divine Interposition. In a word, the whole affair - as the Bollandists put it - *olet figmentum*.

But some will say, how came the legend ever to have been invented? It is so strange, so weird, so essentially unlike any other legend, that it must have some truth in it.

The charitable construction which good Father Cressy (the Benedictine annalist) puts upon the fable is this: 'Some writers, from an unwary mistake, have related how Saint Mildred was cast into a fiery furnace (because while she lived at Chelles in a secular habit she utterly refused the marriage of a person of great quality), and by Divine assistance was preserved from burning. But neither William of Malmsbury nor any other of our ancient records mentions this miracle. Therefore we willingly abstain from adorning that illustrious virgin with borrowed and false or suspected colours.'

Some such material interpretation of a well-known passage in Saint Paul may thus have given rise in an enthusiast's mind to the idea of a material furnace, whence the Saint issued free from scathe, even as the blessed Agnes from a house of shame, and the Three Children from their ordeal of fire: 'Si transieris per ignem odor ejus non erit in te.'

## **Saint Mildred's Flight to Millam**

The legend of the Furnace, stripped of its sensational adjuncts, seems to come to this, that during her stay at Chelles, Mildred was courted by a young hot-headed Frank. Saint Bertille, holy nun, may even have pressed her to accept the engagement, as she was perfectly free to marry if she chose. But we fancy Mildred replying, with another Saxon maid:

'One love I, One; within His bridal bower  
My feet shall tread; One love I, One alone:  
His Mother was a Virgin, and His Sire  
The unfathomed fount of pureness undefiled.  
Him love I, whom to love is to be chaste:  
Him love I, touched by whom my forehead shines,  
Whom she that clasps grows spotless more and more.  
Behold to mine His spirit He hath joined.'

The young noble, failing utterly in gaining Saint Mildred's will, displayed some of those unruly symptoms but too common in his day on the part of disappointed lovers.

In later times, indeed, a maiden would have felt herself safe within the precincts of the cloister. The hand of the Church would have fallen on anyone daring to trespass within those sacred limits; and men in the impetuous Middle Ages did fear the Church of God. Besides, they had been taught to look on woman as something in herself sacred. Chivalry made them observe towards her what the sentiment of Christianity inspired. And even the outlaw was softened by the essentially Christian public opinion of his day. Thus, of Robin Hood we read how his poetic tenderness for the helpless and forlorn was prompted by the highest motives:

'Robyn loved Our dere Lady,  
For doute of dedely synne,  
Wolde be never do company harme  
That ony woman was ynne.'

But there was no such feeling in the times when Saint Mildred lived. Men were then, in great part, still half pagan within the recesses of their hearts. And the Church had not yet enacted the strict law of walled enclosure, as she subsequently did. Hence the maiden who resisted the will of a man of ungoverned passion had but little mercy to expect of him.

Not many years before, the blessed Aldegonde had been forced to seek refuge in flight, and to hide herself from such an one in the dense forest of Maubeuge. At home, Saint Mildred's own sister Mildburg was wooed in the same fierce manner, and had to fly from the monastery of Wenlock. And over the Welsh border, sweet Saint Winefred, in her flight from Prince Caradoc, had her head severed from her body on the spot where ever since her English fellow Christians have witnessed the power of God in His saints.

If these contemporary examples prepare us for a like interpretation of Saint Mildred's flight from Chelles, an immemorial devotion towards her, which has lasted to this our day, at a place called Millam, in French Flanders, will tend to confirm the belief that she took refuge there. No one knows the origin of this devotion, while the legend that has been kept alive among the people is manifestly but a popular version of Saint Mildred's own life.

There has been a chapel to her honour at Millam, time out of mind. The people built it and rebuilt it, without calling in the aid of priest or noble. In fact, there never was a monastery or

lordly mansion in any way connected with that chapel of our Saint.

A strong historical presumption may also be drawn from the ancient names of Millam, high to which the chapel stands. In the ninth century charters of the grand Flemish Abbey of Saint Bertin, the place is designated Muldelhem, Middelhem, and Milhem. Now these names seem directly to refer to our Saint: the Flemish Mulders giving Mulder-hem, and the Latin Mildreda, Mil-hem.

Millam is therefore Saint Mildred's hamlet, and we find it so called within a century of her death. Whence it seems more than probable that she hid herself in its morasses and woodlands in her flight from Chelles, awaiting an opportunity of sailing for England.

It is true that there are now but few trees in the neighbourhood, and the hamlet itself is a full score of miles from the sea. Yet all the antiquarians of Flanders are agreed that the sea once washed the foot of the forest-clad Mount of Watten, where Millam is situated. And the learned Malbrancq, their chief, in a map of the district of the year 800, places Millam on the shore of a long narrow gulf running into the heart of Flanders, and forming a splendid haven almost opposite the Kentish port of Richborough.

Saint Mildred may, then, very well have stayed at Millam long enough to have it permanently associated with her fame, just as the neighbouring Killem is linked with the Celtic Saint Killian, and just too as the ancient chapel of Caestre is said to commemorate the spot where, in 819, three Saxon virgin Saints (*Tres Castes*) were martyred by pagan suitors.

Moreover, Malbrancq distinctly records the tradition that Saint Mildred fled to Millam, and there stayed in a rude cell for a while, hidden away from the world. And though he does not speak of it in connection with Chellesy that very circumstance does but prove its independent character. Once the fact established that Saint Mildred *did* stay at Millam, then it is clear that she sojourned there either on her going to Chelles as a mere girl, or else on her final return home after leaving Chelles. And of the two, the latter is clearly the more probable.

## Profession of Saint Mildred

When the young fugitive neared the shores of Thanet, her mother, Domneva, her aunt, Saint Ermengyth, and all the nuns of Minster, went forth to meet her. Her ship anchored off Ebb's Fleet, close to the beach; and in her anxiety to reach the shore, Mildred stepped on to a large rock, which (tradition says) bore the impress of her foot ever after.

This *Lapis Sanctoe Mildredae*, or Saint Mildred's Rock, is placed out at sea in a map of East Kent, published last century by Lewis. Dean Stanley thinks it the identical rock on which Saint Augustine is said to have set foot. 'It was,' he says, 'afterwards called the footmark of Saint Mildred; and the rock, even till the beginning of the last century, was called Saint Mildred's Rock, from the later Saint of that name, whose fame in the Isle of Thanet then eclipsed that of Augustine himself.'

So far the Dean. Now to our narrative.

Domneva's greeting with her daughter was a most cordial one. She blessed her, in her fulness of heart, in these words: 'Be thou blessed and happy; may thou be rewarded before the Throne of God, and numbered with the choir of virgins.'

Mildred was received at once as a postulant at Minster. The quaint ritual observed on that occasion has been preserved to us in a distinct Saxon fragment. According to that account, 'Mildred stretched herself before the holy altar with extended limbs, and, with a flood of tears, prayed to the Lord. When she had ended her prayer, she stood up and bowed to her mother's knees, who then greeted her with the kiss of peace, and so did all the community. And they brought her water for her hands according to the Rule. To

them, then, all seated together, the Abbess began to intone the psalms of David, and thus to say, "We have received Thy mercy, O Lord, in the midst of Thy temple," as Anna and the aged Simeon sang and made music, when they embraced with their arms the great and illustrious Child Jesus, and bore Him into the Temple and made offering.

'She sang then the other verse, "Confirm, O God, what Thou hast wrought in us from Thy holy Temple in Jerusalem." She sang the third, "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to Thy holy Name, and may glory in Thy praise."

'With these and many other divine words she earnestly instructed her dear child and drew her to God. This was easily done to her, as her conscience was all filled with the Spirit of God.'

This ceremony was evidently that of our Saint's introduction to the cloister as a postulant. There yet remained another and more solemn rite, by which she was to dedicate herself for ever to her Lord and Spouse:

'Quid petis alma virum Sponso jam dedita Summo?  
Sponsus adest Christus!'

The Saxon ritual demanded the presence of the Bishop as witness of this supreme act; and it was Saint Theodore of Canterbury who consecrated Saint Mildred, along with seventy other candidates. This was an extraordinary event in the annals of Kent. The little church of the Virgin Mother could not hold a tithe of the faithful assembled to witness it; and crowds knelt that day on the grassy meads leading down to the river Wantsme, following as best they could the sacred rites within.

The ceremonies opened with the celebration of Holy Mass. At the Communion all the newly consecrated virgins received the Housel, or Victim of Sacrifice (for so the Saxons called the most Blessed Sacrament). And, in accordance with a traditional custom, each carried away with her, in a small pyx, enough of the Sacred Elements to communicate privately every morning during the following week.

Such was the spirit in which the early English Christian women entered upon their maiden pilgrimage, with the esteem of men and the smile of angels upon them.

Truly, O Lord, Thou hast made such as these but little inferior to the Angels!

## Her Monastic Life

The aged Abbess Domneva was not long in resigning the care of the community into her daughter's hands. For, in the year 694, Saint Mildred attended the great Kentish Council of Beccancelde, as Abbess of Minster, while Domneva remained within the cloister.

Withred, son of Egbert, convened this Synod, or *Witenagemot*. Berthwald of Canterbury, and Tobias of Rochester, attended it; and with them were assembled 'Abbots and Abbesses, and many learned men, to deliberate on furthering the interests of God's churches in Kent.' There we find laymen forbidden to meddle in Church matters; safeguards laid down for the appointment of worthy monastic superiors; while the King and the Bishops are exhorted, in their several spheres, to see to the welfare of those entrusted to their care.

These ordinances are signed in the usual Saxon way - *signo sanctae crucis* - by King Withred, the two Kentish Bishops, and others, amongst whom five Abbesses. Of these, Saint Mildred (doubtless because of her kinship with the King), signs immediately after the Bishop of Rochester, thus: *+ Signum manus Mildredae Abbatissae*.

There are eight monasteries of men and of women represented at this Council, viz., those of Canterbury, Reculver, Minster, Dover, Folkestone, Lyminge, Sheppey, and Rochester - all of them founded by King Ethelbert or by his successors.

Some will trace in this attendance of Abbesses at so early a national council, the origin of the custom, sometime prevailing, whereby certain Abbesses sat in the House of

Lords along with the Bishops. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless certain that no woman could speak at a Witenagemot, 'howsoever learned and holy she might be.' Woman's mission in those days was a silent and a peaceful one.

On her return home to the cloisters of Minster, Mildred set to work perfecting herself and her associates in the monastic discipline. In this Saint Aldhelm was her master-guide. His works, in prose and verse, on the high calling of Virginity, are full of the lessons of the Gospel, of the teachings of Austin and Ambrose, Basil and Jerome. In them rings out the tone of *Sursum corda!* and the heart is irresistibly borne higher and higher still:

'Piu alto verso l'Ultima Salute.'

A glimpse of Saint Mildred's monastic life is given us by Jocelyn, who relates how, by her fervour in psalmody, and in long fasts and vigils, she gave evidence of high Christian attainments. She was, he adds, gentle and kindly to the poor, while she drew the hearts of her spiritual daughters to Christ by her maternal goodness and sympathy. Her aim was ever to serve others rather than to be served, to be loved rather than feared. She was, moreover, meek and patient when any difficulty arose, and always most indulgent towards the sick.

This picture of our saint is found drawn in bolder lines by her Saxon biographer, whose record runs simply thus: 'She was merciful to widows and orphans, and a comforter to all the poor and afflicted, and in all respects of easy temper and tranquil.' And as her daughters followed her example, it is not surprising to read that a united spirit of charity reigned in the old Minster of the Virgin Mother of God.

Towards the close of the eighth century, Domneva passed to her reward. Her end was a most peaceful one. Symeon of Durham refers to it in feeling terms. Indeed, throughout her long life, whether as queen or as abbess, she had proved a truly Christian woman - the saintly mother of her sainted daughters - worthy of the title *Matrona Christi-Dei dilecta*, given of old to Saint Perpetua.

Mildred bore her loss bravely. She had now reached that calm region where, in one exercised in virtues from the days of childhood, the soul rests in the spirit of recollection and of prayer as it were by habit. It had been her high privilege to be ever united in spirit with her Maker; for from the dawn of her spiritual life, God had loved her with an everlasting love; He had now called her into solitude, and had spoken to her heart.

We read in Venerable Bede of a holy Saxon monk, who on being questioned by a brother hermit as to the secret of his abiding union with God, answered -

'Till thou seal  
To sounds of earth thine ear,  
Sweet friend, thou ne'er shalt feel  
Angelic voices near.'

And when the holy man's humility was shocked by this unguarded disclosure of his own excellence, he trembled and exclaimed -

'O by the Name most High,  
What I have now let fall,  
Hush till I lay me down to die,  
And go the way of all.'

Here, then, are the chief elements of true religious perfection, viz., love of God and annihilation of self. For in

proportion as the Saints grew nearer and dearer to their great Exemplar Christ, so did they become more and more timorous of being found out by the world. Hence it comes that there are so many Saints concerning whose inner life we know next to nothing. Saint Mildred is one of these. Many, indeed, are the legends and miracles associated with her memory; but of the workings of her own pure soul, the Angels alone have kept a record. For they alone, who know no spot nor wrinkle, were worthy to fathom the white depths of her consecrated love.

Mildred has ever been regarded on earth as a type of true maidenhood; as one who, in all the vicissitudes of life, looked to God and feared not man. The vigilant care she took to make herself less and less unworthy (as she thought) of her high calling, drew down upon her the tender solicitude of the Angels of God. Hence we read how Mildred was guarded by a most affectionate Angel - *amicissimus Angelus*. She was even sometimes vouchsafed corporeal visions of his presence.

Thus once, when slumbering peacefully in her cell, she felt the Evil One was at hand, devising some subtle snare against her, when instantly her Guardian Angel appeared in all the brightness of the light of glory and put the enemy to flight. The Angel then sat beside her, folding his snowy wings over her; for he was jealous of his ward.

At another time it chanced that Mildred had remained in choir after Matins (the community having withdrawn to rest), and was meditating on the Word of God, when all on a sudden the devil extinguished the light by which she was reading. For a moment there was complete darkness; but her befriending Angel, coming to her aid, drove the Wicked One back to the abode of gloom. And forthwith a heavenly light filled the choir, allowing the Saint to continue her pious

reading, and eliciting from her boundless acts of gratitude towards her Maker and Preserver.

It would be idle to comment on such graceful legends as these. He who cannot understand them at first sight, will never understand them at all. In some, they will give rise to 'a most small sneer.' And yet such persons will, in all probability, comfortably digest such incidents as Luther's Ink-bottle Legend. For even Carlyle, in his apotheosis of that arch-heretic of the West, has been at pains to analyze that legend in his hero's favour. But how would a 'Roman Saint' have fared, think you, if he (*quod absit*) had figured in that affair instead of Doctor Martin?

Some there are who cannot fall in with the poetry of the Catholic Church. They cannot understand how

'Flowers would spring where'er she deigns to stray'

and consequently, the religion of their own choosing

'Stands in the desert shivering and forlorn,  
A wintry figure, like a withered thorn.'

The Christians of Saxon times had a true Catholic instinct on the subject. Simplicity was to them a mind-gift, but not a stain upon their intellects. Love of the wonderful and of things poetical entered largely into their spiritual habits of mind. And in this they but resembled more nearly those little children so dear to the Sacred Heart of the Saviour of men.

# Death of Saint Mildred

Towards the close of her earthly pilgrimage, Saint Mildred suffered much and grievous bodily pain. Sickness, says Jocelyn, burnt up her enfeebled frame in holocaust to God. Mildred suffered patiently and well. It was God's will that she should herself give proof of that perfect resignation and detachment she had so often inculcated upon others; His will also that she should experience from her spiritual daughters the loving-kindness she had herself so often exhibited towards them. And they, on their part, while dutifully ministering to her earthly wants, ceased not their prayers for the recovery of one so justly dear to them. 'Lord,' they cried, in their full-hearted grief, 'behold whom Thou lovest is sick. But Jesus hearing it, said to them, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God; that the Son of God may be glorified by it.'

It happened one day that, drawn by the influence of Divine Charity, Mildred went to the church of the Virgin Mother, and there spent herself in acts of more than wonted fervour. When lo! the place became filled with incomparable glory, and the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove seemed for a while to rest upon her head and then entered the sanctuary of her heart. From that instant Mildred knew that she was to be called to her heavenly home. And now more than ever did she welcome that fatal pang that was to free her soul for its journey to eternal peace.

She prayed and she sang, says the monk Jocelyn; the praises of the Lord were ever on her lips, while inwardly she offered herself a living sacrifice to her Creator.

At length came the last and long-desired day. The whole sisterhood was overcome with grief. The Abbess Mildred

called one and all around her, and besought them to preserve the bond of charity in Christ Jesus, to be ever-mindful of their heavenly calling. The tears of her daughters almost made her waver in her longing for death, so keen was their anguish, so deep her love for them. The struggle was a sharp one. But soon Saint Mildred recovered her wonted calm, and said to them, 'Daughters, let your longing be to follow me to heaven, rather than to keep me back in this land of sorrow.' And when they asked her for a parting token, tradition runs that she thus addressed them:

'Maintain, most dear ones, peace and holiness among yourselves, continue to love God diligently, and to do good to your neighbour. In the common needs of the monastery take counsel together, with all your hopes centred in God, as beseemeth those dwelling in His courts. Lend a willing ear to the aged among you, and decide in all things with prudence. Bear ye one another's burthens, obey mutually, be of one body and of one spirit, united in the observance of the Rule, true daughters of the house of God. And may the God of peace and of consolation abide for ever with you all.'

After these pious words of maternal tenderness and solicitude, the dying Abbess received the Holy Viaticum with the fervour her life-long charity had deserved, and passed peacefully into rest on the third day before the ides of July. Her body was laid beside that of the good Queen Domneva, in the church of the Virgin Mother of God, with a lighted taper burning before it, as was the wont of the Saxon Christians when a Saint's body was entombed.

'And now,' says her old biographer, 'she is even nearer to us by her heavenly patronage than she was before by her fellowship on earth. . . . Blessed be God, who rules over all that is holy, and in His saints ever worketh wonders. Amen.'

## Translation of Her Relics

Saint Mildred was succeeded in the government of Minster Abbey by her disciple, Saint Eadberg. The community had grown so numerous during the few preceding years, that the new Abbess set about building a larger monastery. This was eventually dedicated to Saint Peter and Paul by Archbishop Cuthbert, of Canterbury; and as the great majority of the nuns moved into it, the Abbess determined on translating Saint Mildred's relics from the old church to their new chapel.

This dutiful task was performed with no little pomp and ceremony, clergy and people flocking to witness it. Nor was their piety left without reward, for the body of Saint Mildred was found whole and incorrupt. She seemed, say her historians, as though sleeping in a bridal bower. Her very robes were white and spotless. Miracle followed on miracle, and all rejoiced at the manifestation of God's mercy through His lowly handmaid.

The history of England for the next three hundred years rings with the din of wars and conflicts with the Danes or *Heathens*, as the old chroniclers call them. Thanet was a favourite landing-place of theirs, and Minster suffered accordingly:

Thomas of Elmham, in his 'Historia,' speaks of his determination to write a detailed history of all the Abbesses of Minster from Domneva downwards. Unfortunately, he has not done so; and here we can only mention in a passing way that Saint Eadberg was succeeded in 751 by Sigeburga, who in 791 gave place to Seledritha, of revered memory. It was during the rule of this Abbess the Heathens stormed the monastery of Saint Peter and Paul, and eventually set it on

fire. Seledritha, with fearless courage, secured herself and all her sisterhood within the chapel walls, and there in God's Presence one and all they faced their martyrdom by fire.

Certain writers of our day affect to pooh-pooh the idea of Saint Mildred's sarcophagus having survived the wreck of Saints Peter and Paul's. These cynical gentlemen can scarce have examined the remains constantly being dug out of the parched soil of Pompeii. If so, they plight advantageously push their travels a little further, and make for the Anticyras.

As a matter of fact, the three Saxon authors so often quoted in these pages all speak of Saint Mildred's body being at Minster; and as their several manuscripts do not certainly date before Seledritha's time (or, indeed, much before the Conquest), their simple statement of fact may be taken to outweigh an average amount of pooh-poohing.

The Canterbury chroniclers narrate how King Canute bestowed the manor of Minster upon the monks of Saint Augustine's; and it is curious to read how easily they obtained the old Abbey-lands from the King, and how hard they had to beg for the few bones and whited ashes of the great Minster Saint. It was, in fact, only when Canute was about to leave for Rome in 1031 that he was prevailed upon to vow the translation of Saint Mildred's relics to Saint Augustine's, Canterbury, in case of a prosperous journey. Canute went and returned from the Apostolic See that same year; and then Abbot AElfstan obtained the faculty he had so long desired.

The King's letters reached him on Whitsuneve. On the following day, he was already at Minster with Dean Godwin and two trusty monks, Bennet and Rudolph; and as it was high-festival, he invited many of his friends and neighbours to a repast, so that no one suspected anything.

When night came on, AElfstan, with his three brethren, went noiselessly to Saint Mildred's shrine and tried to force it open. In this they at first utterly failed; but after much prayer, the lid of the sepulchre was raised, and the remaining relics of the Saint reverently folded in a white cloth and borne secretly away. The burthen was light, consisting but of fleshless bones, many of them already crumbled into dust; but they gave forth a delightful fragrance, say the Christian chroniclers of the olden time.

The people of Thanet, happening to hear of the monks' doings, gave chase to Abbot AElfstan, arming themselves with swords and staves and weapons of all sorts, to recover the body of their glorious Saint. But the monks had a fair start; and when the angry multitude first sighted them, they had already secured the ferry boats at Saare, and were rowing swiftly over the broad waters of the Wantsume.

Thus did Abbot AElfstan elude his angry pursuers, and secure Saint Mildred's relics for Saint Augustine's minster - the "*mater primaria*" of Saxon monasticism.

There is much that is simple and child-like in this homely narrative. It reads almost like a schoolboy's plot, secretly devised and warily carried out. We like it so. Saint Mildred's relics, we are told, were placed in a shrine near the high altar - Saint Peter's - close to the big lamp called Jesse, and there Mass was daily celebrated.

But the Saint's relics were not long suffered to remain undisturbed; for what with the fear of the Danes, and the enlarging of the chapel, they were moved about from place to place in Saint Augustine's. We must pass over the pious care that Abbot Scotland had for these holy relics, and a deal more of purely local history, until the year 1262, when Abbot Roger, deeming that the relics were not fittingly

honoured, removed them from the seclusion in which they had lain for some years past. Great indeed was his joy on finding the sarcophagus, with an inscription which may be rendered thus:

'Beneath this stone lies Mildred, hallowed maid,  
By whose sweet prayers be God Himself our aid.'

These holy relics were then enshrined anew, and the Festival of this final translation kept the 20th of February of each succeeding year.

## Her Shrine at Canterbury

From the day that Saint Mildred's relics were translated to Canterbury, her shrine seems to have been a frequent resort of pilgrims. Indeed, William of Malmesbury declares that no one of all the illustrious Saints within the cloisters of Saint Augustine's was held in dearer memory, more loved, or more revered, than was the virgin Mildred.

At one time, indeed, there was a bitter controversy about these relics; the regular Canons of Saint Gregory claiming to have translated them from Lyminge, in 1085, by authority of Lanfranc, the Archbishop. But the monks of Saint Augustine's angrily resented this rival claim; and with good cause. The dispute was long and fiercely waged. Even in the fifteenth century, according to Elmham and Capgrave, it had far from abated.

A praiseworthy attempt has been made by Canon Jenkins, of Lyminge, to clear up this difficulty. He claims to have found two Mildreds - the one of Lyminge, the other of Minster. The 'Gregorians,' he maintains, had the one, the 'Augustinians' the other.

The chief authority for this statement is 'an extract from a chronicle of the monastery of Dover, made by Leland, and written not earlier than the reign of Henry I. "Of King Eadbald," it runs, "the son of Ethelbert, who after baptism returned to his idols and exiled the Bishops and priests, much may be found in the life of Saint Mildred, and how he was recalled to the faith by Saint Lawrence," etc.'

'We may here observe,' says Canon Jenkins, 'that the Mildred whose history is here referred to, must be that earlier Mildred for whose sake Ethelburga, the sister of Eadbald, is

said by her monastic biographers to have founded the nunnery of Lyminge, and not the second Mildred, the foundress of the nunnery of Minster, in Thanet, who was not born till about thirty years after the death of Eadbald, and whose life had not the slightest bearing on the circumstances here related. The profound silence of the Saxon historians respecting the earlier Mildred, the niece of Ethelburga, "which led afterwards to the confusion between the two, and to the long controversy between the monasteries of Saint Gregory and Saint Augustine on the subject of their relics, arose, without doubt, from the same delicacy which had suppressed all mention of the second wife of Ethelbert. The ill-omened marriage of this Princess with her stepson is believed to have led to the withdrawal of her name from history; and the singular silence which is observed regarding the Mildred who is described as the niece of Ethelburga, can only be accounted for on the ground that she was the daughter of Eadbald by a marriage which caused so much scandal and affliction to the infant Church of Kent.'

The second marriage of King Ethelbert, with a person who afterwards proved unworthy of him, is, unfortunately, only too firmly established; but we cannot say the same of the Mildred whom Canon Jenkins would make the daughter of that nameless Queen. For it is plain that if an earlier Mildred, of Lyminge, had had even a possible historical existence, the monks of St Augustine's would have pointed their finger to her at once. They had access to more documents than we have now; and they would certainly not have been slow to avail themselves of so easy a means of terminating what to them was a painful and most vexing controversy.

It is, however, refreshing to read of an endeavour made in our day to settle, in a straightforward way, the old feud between the monks of Saint Augustine's and the Canons

regular of Saint Gregory. And with this acknowledgment we must pass on to our subject matter.

Of Saint Mildred of Minster many wonderful miracles and apparitions are recorded. Some of the latter are exceedingly quaint, and even amusing, as where the Saint boxes the ears of a somnolent brother at Saint Augustine's. And this is actually brought as an 'argument' that Saint Mildred's body was really at that monastery, and not at Saint Gregory's.

Jocelyn lived in the midst of this exciting conflict over Saint Mildred's relics. He was the champion of his house; and though he was undoubtedly a good and holy man, his zeal at times outran his discretion. Indeed, his pamphlet against the 'Gregorians' must have afforded a broad target for the shafts of his keen-witted adversaries. Their answer is, however, lost; and perhaps it is as well so.

Passing by the controversial miracles, we are tempted to record one or two as a sample of many others:

1. A drought prevailed when Saint Mildred's body was translated to Canterbury; but, soon after, the rain fell in gracious greeting of the Saint's advent.
2. The wife of Saint Edward the Confessor, in her sad reverses, was vouchsafed an apparition from Saint Mildred, whereby she was not only consoled, but eventually enabled to permanently regain her happiness.
3. A palsied and epileptic woman was suddenly made whole by a vision of the Saint.
4. A palsied man was suddenly restored to health while the Gloria in Excelsis was being sung on Saint Mildred's Day. He walked and sang in joyful glee, and the congregation joined him in praise and thanksgiving.

These and similar records may be found in the Harley and Cotton manuscripts already quoted; in the Lessons of Saint Mildred, found by Rosweide at Millam, in Flanders; and in a sixteenth century manuscript, now at Valenciennes, and formerly belonging to the famous Abbey of Saint Amand.

In a word, the miracles wrought at Saint Mildred's shrine at Saint Augustine's must have been strikingly wonderful, to have thus enabled Jocelyn to address his contemporary fellow-Christians:

'Who is there that has ever approached one so benign in vain? Who is there that is blind, or dumb, or deaf, or ailing, from whatsoever cause, in mind or body, who has failed to obtain relief through her intercession? Verily, Mildred (whose name, in her mother-tongue, signifies "Merciful") pours herself out as a sweet balm on all such as have recourse to her.'

## Saint Mildred's Public Worship

The public worship of Saint Mildred has never been completely broken off. Though it ceased in England, under circumstances that need no telling, it nevertheless survived at Chelles, near Paris, and at Millam in Flanders. And now again, after a lapse of three centuries, it has been re-established in the Isle of Thanet, while there are hopes of its being, ere long, still more generally extended.

The title of Saint, so generally bestowed upon Mildred by Saxon and Norman writers, proves her to have been held in the highest veneration from the earliest times. Still, it was not till the year 1388 that the Holy See appointed her festival to be kept in Thanet, on July 13, under the rite of Double.

A precisely similar observance obtained at Chelles, until its old Abbey walls were pulled down by a set of marauding miscreants during the French Revolution.

At Millam in Flanders, however, the public celebration of her feast continued down to our own day. This local cultus received the highest sanction; for we find Clement XI, in the year 1704, granting a plenary indulgence ad septennium to such as worthily approached the sacraments at Saint Mildred's chapel on July 13.

Before the Revolution, indeed. Mass was celebrated there every Friday throughout the year, but since the confiscation of its glebes, the Holy Sacrifice is only offered up during the days of her ecclesiastical feast tide, which are kept as a *Ducas* or popular holiday.

This old Flemish chapel, of immemorial date, is mentioned in the English Martyrology of 1608, and on the old maps of the district in *Flandria Illustrata*; but the present chapel dates only from 1702, having been then built on the exact site of the older structure. There is nothing peculiarly striking in its long grey nave, the fanciful belfry, and Greek facade. But the surrounding scenery is truly picturesque.

Saint Mildred's chapel lies in a broad and fruitful valley, midway between the Communes of Millam and Merkeghem. A sluggish brook glides noiselessly beside it, under deep shadow of the ash and willow tree; and all around are fields of rich cereals and green pasturage, save northward, where some spare traces yet survive of a vast primaeval forest. This chapel and the brook beside it, called *Sinte Mulders* beek, are places of pilgrimage highly famed in the surrounding country. From miles and miles around fever-stricken people come there to perform their devotions and drink of the brook's healing waters. And many are the graces and favours obtained through *Sinte Mulders'* intercession, if the people's voice speaks truth.

Passing from hospitable Millam, as the Saint herself once did, to the shores of Thanet, our thoughts turn to a small monastery of Benedictine nuns, within bowshot of the ancient church of Mary Mother of God. A passer-by would hardly notice it, so secluded is it amidst the leafy orchards of Minster, 'the Garden of Thanet.'

Thither part of Saint Mildred's relics were translated, quite recently, from Deventer, in Holland, where they had been long preserved and honoured. The Bollandists, in fact, give a long list of ancient authorities, who speak of part of our Saint's relics being honoured at Deventer. How these relics came there is not exactly known; but from the fact of their having been long preserved in the same shrine as those of

Saints Lebuin and Marcellinus (two English missionaries, contemporaries of Saint Mildred), we may infer that they were not translated thither by mere hazard.

The restoration of Saint Mildred's relics to Thanet took place on the 29th of May, 1882. Pastor Bernard Van den Berg, rector of Saint Lebuin's, himself performed this pious task, having first obtained due leave and sanction from his Ordinary, Monsignor Shaepman, Archbishop of Utrecht. Among other distinguished ecclesiastics who took part in the ceremony was the Abbé Félix Bouillet, one of the most zealous promoters of Saint Mildred's cultus in French Flanders.

A solemn Benediction service was held at Saint Augustine's, Ramsgate, on the day of their arrival. They were then borne in solemn procession round the cloisters, while the Litany of the Saints was chanted. On the following day the solemn Votive Mass of Saint Mildred was sung at Minster - Pastor Van den Berg was celebrant, Abbé Félix Bouillet deacon, and Dom Hilary Cassal, O.S.B., sub-deacon; the Prior of Saint Augustine's preaching from the text, 'Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum: ita desiderat anima mea ad Te, Deus.'

The Holy Father, ever mindful of the English faithful, bestowed a plenary Indulgence on such as should assist at these ceremonies; and by a Rescript of May 14, 1882, further directed that commemoration of the Saint should be made for three days at all Masses said at Ramsgate and Minster.

Such was the day of return of Saint Mildred to Thanet. Her welcome home by the sisterhood at Minster was a most cordial one. Once more it proved 'How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.'

The Abbess Mildred's one aim in life was to love God with her whole heart, and to draw others to His love. She is now dead, it is true, and her body is crumbled into dust; but the fair fame of her virtuous deeds, so far from having died away, still animates the choir of nuns, who in our day follow their peaceful avocations on the very spot where their sainted patron of old gave forth in such abundance 'a good odour of Christ.'

## **Appendix A - Date of Saint Mildred's Birth**

There have been many and conflicting opinions as to the date of Saint Mildred's birth. The Bollandists give quite a bewildering collection of them. But by going back to original sources, it becomes clear that our Saint was born between A.D. 655 and 665.

The former of these dates may be made out thus:

Saint Mildred's father, Merwald, was the youngest of four sons, the eldest of whom, Peada by name, married on his conversion in 653. His three brothers were all converted subsequently, and as they all were wedded to Christian wives, we may take it that they all married after the year 653. Especially so in the case of Merwald; for not only was he the youngest among them, but he married into a family whose traditions expressly forbade the giving of a Christian maiden to a pagan lord in wedlock.

Saint Mildred, being Merwald's second daughter, could not, therefore, have been born before the year 655.

The latest possible date of her birth may be drawn from the fact that she received the veil at the hands of Saint Theodore of Canterbury, who died in 690. At this date our Saint must have been at least twenty-five years old, as no Saxon nun could receive the veil before that age. Hence it is possible for Saint Mildred to have been born as late as 665.

After carefully putting together a number of little facts which it would be tedious to reproduce here, it seems to me that the mean between these two dates, viz. 660, is the most likely year of our Saint's birth.

## **Appendix B - On King Egbert's Expiation**

Besides the heavy weregild imposed by law in Saxon times for the crime of homicide, there was another and still heavier penalty visited on the culprit seeking reconciliation with God and communion with the Church. Canonical penances were then in full force; and the penance enjoined by Saint Theodore of Canterbury on one who should slay his kinsman or a priest, is that he wander barefoot from place to place, an exile from his fatherland, for seven years, visiting the shrines of Saints, and holding aloof from Christian communion. Such an one, as Sir Walter Scott graphically describes him, wandered with unhallowed feet -

'A being whom no blessed word  
To ghostly peace can bring;  
A wretch at whose approach abhorred  
Recoils each holy thing.'

And even when the trespass had been done undesignedly, the offender had to present himself before his Bishop, who thereupon pronounced judgment on the case. 6 Kings and princes had to submit to this law. Indeed, it proved a most salutary check on those outbursts of fiery passion which among warlike chieftains often take the place of arguments and plunge whole nations into war. Thus, when Saint Mildred's uncle, King Ethelred of Mercia, slew the brother of Egfrid of Northumbria in battle, he atoned for this slaughter, at the instance of Saint Theodore, by giving Egfrid a large ransom.

It was therefore only in strict accordance with the customary law of the land that King Egbert, on the murder of his

nephews under such suspicious circumstances, sent for his Ordinary, Saint Theodore, to arrange about the weregild of his crime, and to make the public satisfaction required of him by the Church; and those who object to the King's conduct on *à priori* grounds, should seek some loftier principle than a sneer on which to base their objection.

## **Appendix C - The Saxon and Norman Records of the Stag Legend Compared**

The Saxon account of the foundation of Minster Abbey is preferable to the Norman record, not only because of its priority in date, but because it is at once more simple and more correct. For instance:

§1. The Norman Canterbury chroniclers are wrong in stating that Ermenred died before King Earconbert came to the throne.

Because:

King Eadbald's marriage with Emma took place not before 616, and he died in 640: hence Ermenred was at most twenty-three years old at the time of his father's death and his brother Earconbert's accession. Now all agree that Ermenred had a family of two sons and two, three, or even four daughters by his wife Oslaf. And hence it is unreasonable to suppose that he died at so early an age with a large family of children.

Those who follow the Saxon writers are not liable to this objection; for they distinctly state that Ermenred was deprived of his sovereignty by craft (*callide*), and lived on in his brother's reign.

§2. Again: If the Canterbury authors were right in stating that Ermenred died before the year 640, it is impossible that Ethelred and Ethelbert should have been boys or youths (as they assert) at the time of their martyrdom.

For:

If Ermenred died before 640, and Egbert began his reign in 664, 10 Ethelred and Ethelbert, the two sons of Ermenred, must have been at least twenty-four years old at the date of their martyrdom under Egbert.

This objection has been forcibly put by Lewis in his 'History of the Isle of Thanet.'

But the Saxon narrators are not open to this objection; for they allow Ermenred to have lived on during part of the twenty-four years of his brother's reign; and hence his two sons may have been any age at the beginning of Egbert's reign.

Note, however, that they were youths rather than boys, as they are distinctly praised for leading a life of holy innocence and unspotted purity. They were "Martyrs 'stablished in virginity," like Saint Hugh of Lincoln, of whom Chaucer sang.

§ 3. On the other hand, the Canterbury chroniclers are right in saying that it was Saint Theodore, and not Saint Deusdedit, who adjudged the weregild of the youths' murder.

Because:

Archbishop Deusdedit died on July 14, 664, the same day as King Erkonbert of Kent, King Egbert's father. And he was succeeded by Archbishop Theodore, who was therefore the Ordinary to whom Egbert submitted his case.

But the very blunder of the Saxon authors in saying that Egbert sent for Deusdedit is useful to us, because:

(a) It proves that they did not copy their account of the martyrdom and Stag Legend from Canterbury sources - no

Canterbury man could have made such a blunder.

(b) It leads us to infer that the murder of the youths took place very early in Egbert's reign - so early, in fact, that Saint Theodore's great name was not yet familiar, as it afterwards became, throughout Saxon England.

## Appendix F - On the Preservation of Saint Mildred's Relics at Minster

It is well known that the art of building in stone was only reintroduced into England in the seventh century by Saints Paulinus, Bennet Biscop, and Wilfrid of York, who one and all had acquired it at Rome. But long after their day, churches and monasteries continued to be built with oaken planks or with wattles, roofed with reeds or sheeted over with lead. And sometimes the old and the new styles were combined in the one building. Thus Saint Bede speaks of a church at Campodonum being burnt along with the town by the heathens, 'but the altar *being of stone* escaped the fire.'

A precisely similar circumstance may have saved Saint Mildred's shrine, which was of stone, while the lighter fabrics of the cloistered building perished in the flames.

Some, it is true, will but mock the more on seeing this explanation of what to them appears a 'monkish invention.' They have sneered at Saint Mildred herself, and cannot therefore be expected to have much patience with those who so piously cared for her relics. Still, as the contents of a Christian grave can hardly have been of much value in the eyes of the heathen Danes, we may take it, I think, that Saint Mildred's bones were left unheeded amidst the ruins of Saint Peter and Paul's chapel, and not treated as were those of Saint Thomas of Canterbury some centuries later. For of the Danes, at least, it may be said -

'They did not know how hate can burn  
In hearts once changed from soft to stern,  
Nor all the false and fatal zeal  
The converts of revenge can feel.'

## Appendix G - The Legend of Millam

The legend of Saint Mildred of Millam runs as follows:

On a brook near the forest of Ravensberg a statue was found standing upon a stone and floating up-stream. It was twice borne to the parish church, and twice returned to the place where it was first found. A chapel was accordingly raised on that very spot to the Saint's honour. Her statue was ensconced beside the high altar with this legend at its feet: 'Sancta Mildreda ora pro nobis.'

This story may be heard from the lips of any of the well-to-do yeomen farmers in the vicinity of Millam. Doubtless the imagination of their ancestors played upon the original legend; and their love of the wonderful set the statue upon a stone and made it float up stream. Yet the Flemish, as a race, are not held to be highly imaginative.

One conclusion, however, can be positively drawn from the legend, viz., that Saint Mildred must have been known and loved at Millam before the statue ever made its appearance. Else, how came it to be named after her?

In the eyes of the people, Saint Mildred is still their constant benefactress. And while they look up to her in time of need, they are not unmindful of her in their festive seasons.

There are in the neighbourhood of Millam two yearly feasts or *Ducas*, the one in honour of Saint Omer, patron of the parish, the other of Saint Mildred, the people's patroness. On each occasion, as it comes round year by year, family parties are made up, a fair is held, and general holiday kept on the festival of the Saint and the two following days.

The *Ducas* of Saint Mildred opens on her feast, July 13, or rather, now, on the Sunday nearest to that day, either before or after it. Mass, up to 1869, was said by the Curé and other priests at the chapel; and after Vespers, dancing and merry-making was the order of the day. In former times the dancing used to cease at sunset, and the parties went home to begin a fresh round of revels amidst their own friends and acquaintances. But latterly it became 'fashionable' to prolong the out-door sports until past midnight.

From the chapel to the village is a good half hour's walk; and as drinking goes on, more or less, all day long, *more Flandrico*, during *Ducas*, it is not surprising that scenes of misconduct were loudly complained of.

In consequence of this the Archbishop of Cambrai, on the 17th of July, 1869, sent an order forbidding the celebration of Mass or the chanting of Vespers in Saint Mildred's Chapel. Abbé Baillieu, then Curé of Millam, was much grieved at this. The Mass on Saint Mildred's Day was a time-honoured institution. It had survived the great Revolution. The people loved the Saint. The wrong-doers were few. The good Abbd demurred to this sweeping measure, and not without effect; for, on the 27th of August following, he was informed that if he could obtain guarantees from the civil authorities, and the goodwill of the people against the recurrence of the scandals complained of, the Archbishop was disposed to temporize.

Everybody knows that the following year found France in the death-grip of Prussia. And never since has the Holy of Holies been lifted up within Saint Mildred's Chapel. The people, it is true, still go there to pray. A sconce of some eighty tapers, before the Saint's statue, testifies to the devotion within them. But the Interdict has disallowed the Bodily Presence of

the Prince of Peace; and, till He returns, all is there stark and desolate.

The origin of the popular devotion to Saint Mildred at Millam is lost to historic record. Her chapel we believe to have taken the place of the oratory built over the cell occupied by the Saint after her flight from Chelles. But it was never associated with any religious community, and consequently no monastic record of its existence has survived.

Nevertheless, it has kept its humble place so firmly in the people's mind, that even now they think of their Sinte Mulders every bit as proudly as their forefathers did of the Augustinian shrines at Watten, of those of the Bernardines at Ravensberg, of Saint Winnoc's at Berg, or the grand Benedictine Abbey of Our Lady of Bourbourg, where Saint Thomas of Canterbury took refuge in his flight from Henry. Indeed, all these have passed away, while Saint Mildred's Chapel still remains.

The folk-lore of this little out-of-the-way place is of great interest to us, as it gives a continuity to the public worship of our Saint, which otherwise would have been broken - in England at the overthrow of the ancient faith, and in France when the towers of Chelles were pulled down by a mob of ruffians and committed to the flames.

## About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the book *Life of Saint Mildred, Abbess of Minster in Thanet*, written by "A Lay-Tertiary of Saint Francis". The edition used was published by R Washbourne in London, England in 1884. Several of the appendices of the print version have been omitted as they were partially in Latin, and covered matters not directly related to the life and legends of Saint Mildred.

The image used on the cover and the [preface](#) is a detail of a stained glass window of Saint Mildred, date and artist unknown. The window is in the Church of Saint Mildred, Preston, Kent, England. It was photographed on 26 May 2004 by John Salmon, and the image swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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